Thomas Brattle (1658 – 1713)

Thomas Brattle was born in Boston, MA, on June 6, 1658, to Thomas and Elizabeth Brattle. His maternal grandfather arrived in America early in the seventeenth century and established a wealthy business as a merchant. Since he had no sons, his daughter Elizabeth inherited the business and estate. As a result, Thomas grew up in with considerable wealth and power. He was the first of seven children; all, with the exception of Thomas and his brother William, continued the family business as merchants. Those two, however, pursued academic careers, and as a result they became two of the most influential and intelligent people in seventeenth-century Massachusetts.

Thomas and William both attended Harvard College. Thomas graduated in 1676. During his schooling he developed an interest in astronomy and mathematics. At this time universities did not place much importance on the study of the natural world; many still accepted the views of Aristotle and Ptolemy. From 1650 on, however, Harvard accepted the theories of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler.

Thomas and William were early members of a new group of scientific thinkers that practiced a more intense and rational thought process that grew much larger in the eighteenth century. Thomas and a group of other prominent colonists studied several comets that appeared in the late seventeenth century. He wrote several essays on these comets. William also had an interest in astronomy among other topics. His master’s thesis, “An Ephemeris of Celestial Motions”, urged others to question why eclipses happen, not to just calculate when they will occur. William also urged England and its colonies to switch from the Julian calendar to today’s more efficient Gregorian calendar. William’s greatest accomplishment however was his book, *Compendium of Logic*, which gave an in-depth study of Cartesian logic. It became the dominant textbook on logic at Harvard from 1687 to at least 1743, and possible until 1767.

Thomas and William espoused ideas that were considered radical, resulting in sometimes making them unpopular with the powerful Congregationalist Puritan Church. Thomas spoke against the “sight and touch” test during the Salem witch trials; he suggested that those who confessed to being a witch were coerced. Thomas also founded the Brattle Street Church that broke away from the Congregationalist church and had much more rational and liberal views. This sparked an intense dispute between Thomas and the famous Puritan minister, Cotton Mather.

Thomas and William also dedicated much of their lives toward improving Harvard. William served as a tutor and later as an unofficial professor of divinity, law, and medicine. Thomas gave many donations to Harvard and, from 1693 to his death in 1713, served as treasurer of the college. He also was an unofficial professor of mathematics and astronomy. The brothers developed such high standing at Harvard that from 1701 to 1707 William served as Harvard’s unofficial president between Increase Mather and the college’s first nonsectarian president, John Leverett.

When Thomas Brattle died on May 5, 1713, he left Massachusetts and the New World with a new, rational approach towards thought. His brother William and he were the brightest lights of intelligence and rationality amongst an often irrational and superstitious population.

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Sources: